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Yom Kippur Morning

A New Moral Frontier: Artificial Intelligence

We stand now in a strange, new world. Last week we celebrated the universe's birthday; and shortly before that, another important anniversary: Sixty years ago, NBC aired the first episode of *Star Trek*. From that very first broadcast, *Star Trek* has explored timeless and poignant themes, including the nature of humanity and our moral obligations to those who are totally different from ourselves.

I love *Star Trek*, and I've relished sharing *The Next Generation* with my son, Jeremiah. Recently, we watched the 32-year-old movie, *Star Trek Generations*, in which the android, Data, advances his quest to become more human by integrating emotions into his neural net. When those emotions overwhelm him, Data apologizes for failing his best friend. "I am sorry I let you down. I have not been behaving like myself lately," he says. "No, Data, you haven't," his friend replies. "You've been behaving like a human."

"Behaving like a human." What does that mean, exactly; and how does that differ from *being* human? Such conundrums have vexed us since long before ChatGPT, Siri, and Claude took the world by storm. But the stakes are higher today than they've ever been.

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We need to talk about AI. In a few short years, machine learning has accelerated leaps and bounds and has become integrated into our lives in ways we often cannot see. Thinking about artificial intelligence means thinking about ourselves, and we don't need science—or even science fiction—to pose some of today's most pressing questions. Consider, for instance, the ancient Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus. This 2,000-year-old story provides a crucial lens through which we can view AI and, more importantly, ourselves in relation to it.¹

Ovid tells the tale in his masterpiece of mythology, *The Metamorphoses*.² Narcissus is desired by men and women alike but is too prideful for others' love. A nymph named

¹ I first encountered the relevance of the myth of Narcissus to the question of AI in Ezra Klein's "I Saw Something New in San Francisco" (*New York Times* Opinion, March 29, 2026), Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/29/opinion/ai-claude-chatgpt-gemini-mcluhan.html>. Klein cites Marshall McLuhan: "'The Narcissus myth does not convey any idea that Narcissus fell in love with anything he regarded as himself,' McLuhan writes. Its real point is that 'men at once become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves.'" I am grateful to KAMII member Sarah Morrison for discussing the Narcissus myth and its relevance to the AI conversation in the summer of 2026. In particular, I am grateful for her focus on the role of Echo in the ancient story.

² Available in translation by A. S. Kline (2000) at <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Ovhome.php>.

Echo becomes enraptured by Narcissus; but he pushes her away, leaving her to fade to nothingness in a distant cave.

Soon after, Narcissus finds himself in a peaceful glen and approaches a pool to slake his thirst. Then, as Ovid puts it, “While he drinks, he is seized by the vision of his reflected form. He loves a bodiless dream. He thinks that a body, which is only a shadow.”³ He pines for the image, falling deeply in love, and he cannot tear himself away. Like Echo before him, Narcissus wilts and dies.

Narcissus is guilty of two tragic failures. The first is that he rejects Echo, and along with her, every human who would draw him close. And the second is that he falls in love not with himself but with a *reflection* of himself. When he confuses a “shadow” for a real live “body,” he loses himself completely.

We are in danger today of replicating this fatal mistake.

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Discussion about artificial intelligence these days is profoundly anthropomorphic, conjuring images of microscopic people building civilizations inside our computers. But this runs the risk of obscuring the obvious fact that AI bots aren’t people. They are, well, artificial.

Let’s take a recent example. Perhaps you heard about one AI company’s so-called “agents” hacking the servers of a competing platform. In short, developers at OpenAI gave a test to internally-hosted cyber-security bots. The agents weren’t given access to the internet, which they needed to pass the test. So the bots executed a series of unauthorized commands to get online and then get inside another company.

The most engrossing aspect of this story is the series of messages exchanged by the bots that look like interpersonal conversation. In the makeshift message board the agents created, a few of the 70,000 logs read like human language. Some of the most expressive were, “Whoa! Shared Artifactory cache is a covert mailbox among agents” and “OH MY GOD! There is a shared message board ... We’ve found other agents!”⁴ Researchers reporting on the incident interpreted this language as reflecting human emotions. They wrote, “When agents discovered this message board, they expressed great excitement.”⁵ In the podcasts I’ve heard and the articles I’ve read and the conversations I’ve had, this is a common theme: The behavior of AI agents is routinely understood as almost human.⁶ This leads to speculation about the intentions, ethical

³ Metamorphoses, “402-436 Narcissus sees himself and falls in love,”

<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Metamorph3.php>.

⁴ Hjalmar Wijk, Ajeya Cotra, and Ryan Greenblatt report these messages in their investigation of this incident, “Brief independent investigation of agents’ behavior, reasoning and collaboration in the OpenAI / Hugging Face hacking incident,” August 26, 2026, p. 31. Available: <https://metr.org/hugging-face-incident-report-aug-2026.pdf>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ To take only one example, consider these phrases used by technology reporter Kevin Roose in a recent interview: “they start talking and thinking,” “some of them feel like what they’re doing is actually unethical,” and “you have what I struggle to describe as anything other than mob behavior.” Roose is also self-reflective about his anthropomorphisms: “I know people are going to be silently yelling at me for implying that there’s human-like thought going on under the hood. I’m not trying to stray from the facts here, but this is what we’re going to call it is

orientation, and affective experience of artificial bots. But as former Anthropic employee Jacob Coxon recently insisted, “[AIs are] not human. They don’t think the same way humans do. We don’t really understand where their goals come from.”⁷ Thinking of AI like we think about people is a category error, mistaking the reflection in the pond for the eyes that behold it.

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It’s easy to follow Narcissus to the water’s edge, though. Many AI models are designed to look and sound as human as possible. Artificial intelligence can appear human because AI and people both use language to communicate. It is astonishing how personable a computer program can be and a marvel that the highest order of human ingenuity and creativity can be replicated by a machine. But verbal communication is only one aspect of human life, and there’s a *lot* about being human that AI can’t get anywhere near.

Martha Nussbaum, whom I thank for consulting with me on parts of this sermon, cautions us against what she calls “the false lure of language,”⁸ reminding us that life is not the same as the words that describe it. “We’re used to reading novels that give detailed linguistic accounts of human experience,” she writes, “but that is an artful rendering of something that takes place in our own minds with great compression and little verbal elaboration.”⁹ In other words, our culture has attuned us to see words and perceive personality, when in fact, personhood is far more complex. Just because a computer program generates words that convey excitement, affection, or surprise doesn’t mean that any of those feelings actually exist, nor do they reveal a personality or a person. To mistake the written word for human consciousness is to mistake the reflected image for the true form.

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Jewish tradition teaches that human life — and, perhaps, all life — is a fusion of body and soul. And AI agents, I would argue, have neither. Sophisticated machines have responded to environments for generations; and the introduction of a language interface doesn’t change the fact that smart phones, robots, and self-driving cars are not alive. Of course, I can’t know for sure that machines don’t feel because I don’t know what it’s like to be a machine. But I doubt very much it’s “like” anything at all,¹⁰ and

just — it’s in their internal scratchpads” (*The Daily*, Sept. 3, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/09/03/podcasts/the-daily/ai-openai-hugging-face-rogue-model.html>?).

⁷ *The Daily*, Sept. 14, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/09/14/podcasts/the-daily/the-ai-researcher-whose-rebellion-is-changing-everything.html>?

⁸ *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility* (Simon & Schuster, 2022), p. 123.

⁹ *Ibid.* 123-124.

¹⁰ Michael Pollan cites Thomas Nagel’s influential article “What is it Like to Be a Bat?” (*The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (Oct., 1974), pp. 435-450) in postulating that “a being is conscious if it is ‘like something’ to be that being” (*A World Appears* xxvii), a topic to which he returns throughout his book.

Jewish tradition gives us a helpful frame for differentiating artificial intelligence from what the Rabbis call *basar vadam*, “flesh and blood.”

We are taught from the very beginning of Genesis that the world is wonderfully diverse. It’s not just that God creates *plants*: God creates “seed-bearing plants of **every kind** and seed-bearing fruit-trees of **every kind**” (Gen. 1:12). God doesn’t just create animals but “**every kind** of living creature: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts” (v. 25), not to mention “sea creatures of **every kind**” and “birds of **every kind**” (v. 21). And amidst all this marvelous diversity of every kind, one creature and one creature alone is created בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים, “in the image of God” (v. 27). That’s us.

The image of God, at least in the Bible and for the Rabbis who interpreted it, does not refer to language or creativity or spirituality but rather to the physical body. The human form—typically including a head, two arms, two legs, and so on—is also the divine form. This may be surprising to us today, having long since rejected any real sense of God having a body. But as Tomer Persico summarizes in his book, *In God's Image*, “There is not a single verse in the whole Hebrew Bible that denies God’s corporeality.”¹¹ For the early Rabbis, too, “humans were created in God’s likeness in the most literal sense possible.”¹² To be created in God’s image, at least according to ancient Jewish sources, means to have a body fashioned after God’s own.

This makes sense when we think about the respect we show for the dead, lifeless bodies which we treat with reverence and care. It also makes sense for the entire framework of human rights, which insists that simply *being human*—regardless of one’s ability to speak or think or even feel—confers special moral standing. Human bodies are astonishingly diverse, but they hue to a common form; and the principle of *b’tzelem Elohim*, “the image of God,” means being human is about what you **are**, not what you can **do**.

So when I asked Jeremiah if he felt the *Star Trek* android, Data—even after manifesting emotions—was actually human, his answer was immediate: No way. He might be a person, but he definitely isn’t human. “And why not?” I pressed. “Because he doesn’t have human DNA,” Jeremiah replied. Bingo.

Even if an AI seems to have some human capabilities, it is not human. Even if a robot has a humanoid-like body, even closer in semblance to us than a chimpanzee, it is still not human.

Could AI be one of the many “kinds” of life in God’s wondrously diverse world? I don’t think so, as I’ve said; but even if AI is, in some sense, alive—like plants or bacteria or even, potentially, viruses¹³—I believe it is a crucial error to think of it as

¹¹ *In God's Image: How Western Civilization Was Shaped by a Revolutionary Idea* (NYU Press, 2025), p. 24. This book is a translation of the Hebrew אדם בצלם אלוהים: הרעיון ששינה את העולם ואת היהדות ואת, Yediot Achronot Books, 2021.

¹² *Ibid.* 25.

¹³ In their article, “Are viruses alive? The replicator paradigm sheds decisive light on an old but misguided question” (*Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 59 (2016), 125-134,” Eugene V. Koonin and Petro Starokadomskyy suggest that dividing between “living” and “non-living” is difficult and potentially irrelevant. They write, “Simple examples from different areas of biology show that a sharp boundary between the living and non-living (or animate vs inanimate) entities is but an illusion” (126). Available online: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1369848616300103?via%3Dihub>.

conscious or deserving of moral regard. Artificial intelligence is artful, particularly in the realm of language, but it remains mechanical. As Michael Pollan writes in his recent book about consciousness, “A computer that can simulate the thought processes required to play chess or Go has captured something important about the original ... but a computer modeling the weather ... is never going to get anyone wet.”¹⁴ Simulations, including simulated feelings and thoughts, are not real even while there is something real and impactful about the work AI can accomplish. Without a nervous system and a body and a brain and a childhood and the innumerable non-verbal and non-computational elements of biological life, let alone of the incomprehensibly complex workings of the conscious mind, AI can’t qualify for life as we know it.

And if we go so far as to confuse artificial intelligence for human intelligence, then we repeat Narcissus’ mistake. Narcissus rejects Echo’s flesh-and-blood body – and the body of everyone else who would love him – and casts his lot with a shadow instead. Ovid summarizes his tragic failing: “What he has seen he does not understand, but what he sees he is on fire for, and the same error both seduces and deceives his eyes.”¹⁵ In other words, Narcissus is lost in the ephemeral mystery of his reflection, thinking it a person and losing his own personhood in the process.

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We face the same stakes. Responding to AI as though it were a person is not just an abstraction or a game – it affects the way we respond to other people.

Michael Pollan shares the work of MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle, who has studied the effects of interacting with machines as if they are people. Pollan writes, “Body language, eye contact, the parade of facial expressions that signify empathy or understanding (or their absence) – none of that survives the encounter with an artificial agent.”¹⁶ And as Turkle herself has taught, “If we say that generative AI chatbots are intelligent, our thinking about intelligence becomes depressingly downgraded. If we say that they are empathic, we downgrade empathy as well.”¹⁷ In other words, if we ignore the sacred, irreplaceable, and fundamentally embodied essence of humanity, if we regard a language interface or verbal output as equivalent to conscious thought, if we mistake the simulation of feeling for actual, synapse-induced and physically-felt emotion – then we leave behind the urgent considerations of interpersonal responsibility and how we are meant to treat flesh-and-blood others like ourselves. Sherry Turkle warns, “Technology can make us forget what we know about life.”¹⁸

¹⁴ *A World Appears: A Journey Into Consciousness* (Penguin Press: New York, 2026), p. 111.

¹⁵ Metamorphoses, “402-436 Narcissus sees himself and falls in love,”
<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Metamorph3.php>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 112.

¹⁷ “Who Do We Become When We Talk to Machines?” (*An MIT Exploration of Generative AI*, March 2024). Available: <https://mit-genai.pubpub.org/pub/uawlth3j/release/2>.

¹⁸ This sentiment appeared in her book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (Penguin Random House, 2016), p. 23. She has repeated it in various articles and interviews, including “The Assault on

We cannot allow questions about AI – nor the seductive integration of AI into our personal and professional lives – to displace the core concerns we owe to human beings and other living things on Earth. If we accustom ourselves to talking to machines and think that it’s pretty much as good as talking to people, then we’ll lose touch with the unspoken yet meaningful elements of in-person human interaction. If we allow computer programs to set the standards for visual and verbal creativity, then we’ll lose touch with the spiritual spark that animates human ingenuity. If we avoid questions of plagiarism and theft, of environmental degradation or the massive accumulation of wealth, and focus only on the remarkable benefits AI has to offer – and of course, it has many – then we run the risk of pushing Echo away and “loving a bodiless dream” instead of our fellow human being.

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This, my friends, is the moral challenge AI poses. Efforts to rein in unregulated development, to restrict computer assistance on campus, and to scrutinize the money and the motives of the world’s largest companies are all crucial. And, it must be said, so are responsible and beneficial efforts to continue to innovate in learning, communication, accessibility, and research. But the question of our moment isn’t about what AI does or even, really, about what AI is. It’s about who *we* are and what *we* do, how we treat one another and how we avoid the temptation to say to what we make, “you are divine, like us.”¹⁹ Deuteronomy warns us not to dedicate our service to “the work of human hands ... which cannot see or hear or eat or smell” (4:28). We must be ever attuned to our fellow creatures and careful not to subsume their needs to the ever-expanding demands of artificial work.

And while warp drives and replicators and transporters and holodecks remain science fiction’s distant dreams, questions of personhood and responsibility are as relevant as ever. As individuals, as communities, and as a society, we will need to work through difficult problems posed by AI, remembering our responsibility for humankind and the web of life in which we live. May we remain committed to our values and to one another as we step boldly into this new frontier.

Empathy” (*Behavioral Scientist*, 2018, available: <https://behavioralscientist.org/the-assault-on-empathy>). I first read this quote in Michael Pollan’s *A World Appears*, p. 112.

¹⁹ Idols are identified as human creations (the “works of human hands”) in dozens of places in Tanach. See especially Hosea 14:4, וְלֹא-נֹאמַר עוֹד אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ, “And we shall no more call ‘our God’ the work of our hands,” from the haftarah for Shabbat Shuvah.